

White Paper

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Revitalizing the Ecclesiastical and Secular Sources for Slave Societies Digital Archive:

(Since Renamed the Slave Societies Digital Archive)

A Proposal to Improve Technology & Promote Collaboration

Project Director, Jane Landers Vanderbilt University

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On behalf of the Slave Societies Digital Archive (SSDA) project teams, I would like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for its support and report here on the achievements of the project. During the grant period, SSDA teams were able to accomplish critical technical improvements, build new international and domestic collaborations, grow the archive significantly, and promote the project through a variety of public presentations, social media, and publications. The most significant accomplishments of this grant are detailed below.

Added Staffing

As related in my interim report, with NEH permission, in 2017 I hired my graduate student, Daniel Genkins, on a doctoral fellowship of \$32,125 (\$25,000 with fringe benefits of 28.5%), which left \$40,703 remaining from my approved Year II salary buy-out (\$72,828). After completing his PhD, Genkins won a two-year CLIR fellowship and spent a year of it at the John Carter Brown Library. He returned to Vanderbilt earlier this year to take a Mellon postdoctoral fellowship and I have named him Executive Director of the SSDA. In that role, Genkins is responsible for managing project personnel and finances, interfacing and collaborating with other projects and organizations at Vanderbilt and elsewhere, and continuing to develop SSDA's technical infrastructure personally.

In 2017 I also hired my former doctoral student, Dr. Kara Schultz, who is fluent in Spanish and Portuguese paleography to create volume-level metadata from our collection, extract structured information from volume transcriptions, and produce GIS data to enhance our web presentation. In 2018, Schultz moved to Brazil but continued to work for SSDA from a distance managing metadata production for a collaborative project with the Archdiocese of Niterói, funded by the British Library Endangered Archive Programme, which she co-directed.

Although technically on sabbatical, and exempt from teaching, I have continued to direct and supervise the SSDA at Vanderbilt. In addition managing the project, I supervise three off-site consultants and four current graduate students trained in Spanish paleography and transcription. As a

partner in the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Enslaved project at Michigan State University, I was able to hire an additional computer consultant whose technological work on SSDA is described below.

New Collaboration in Brazil: Rio de Janeiro

In 2017, SSDA received funding from the British Library Endangered Archive Programme (EAP) to launch a new digital project preserving ecclesiastical records of African from the state of Rio de Janeiro. In December 2017, Dr. Schultz accompanied me to Brazil, where our former graduate student and now collaborator in other EAP projects, Dr. David LaFevor, ran a workshop to train our Brazilian co-directors, Francisco Muller and Dr. Mariza Soares and four selected Brazilian students in British Library digitization and metadata standards and guidelines. Additional collaborators from Vanderbilt and from the Catholic Church in Itaguaí also attended the workshop. Thereafter Muller supervised the daily operations of the project in the Archive of the Archbishopric of Niterói with the assistance of Soares and Schultz.

Added Data from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

The materials digitized in Niterói were gathered from across the state of Rio de Janeiro and date from 1648 (the early colonial period) through 1888 (the year in which slavery was declared illegal in Brazil). Student teams we hired successfully digitized the 162 volumes of which six date from the seventeenth century, thirty-seven from the eighteenth century, and 119 from the nineteenth century. Among these volumes, we were surprised to find the registers of a long abandoned Jesuit mission from the interior of the state, Santo Antonio de Sá e Convento de São Boaventura. The impressive ruins of this mission have been the object of [archaeological investigations](#), but until now, no one realized that any of its documents survived. Our student teams also re-digitized volumes captured on older equipment during our first NEH Challenge Grant work in Niterói in 2005. As a result, we have added a total of 265 volumes of parish registers that yielded 60,256 digital images of endangered records. These include slave registries, registries of freed slaves, and last wills and testaments of free black and white

slave owners. In addition, our Brazilian co-directors arranged for local photographers to capture professional images of the churches that once held these materials and these will also be made available online on the SSDA and Archdiocese websites.

In July 2018, our Niterói team and team members from a second collaborative project funded by the British Library in Paraíba, Brazil presented sequential panels at the Brazilian Studies Association (BRASA) meeting held in Rio de Janeiro. There was strong interest in the audience that might generate additional proposals from scholars in Paraíba and Pernambuco and I have sent them models of our grants. At the BRASA conference, I collected hard drives from our Brazilian directors/presenters Vitoria Lima and Francisco Muller and brought them back to Vanderbilt where our IT specialists in the Vanderbilt Library processed and stored the new images.

New Collaboration in Brazil: Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

During our grant period, SSDA also supported the conclusion of a project initiated by the historians of slavery at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, which they were unable to finish due to the economic crisis in Brazil. Drs. Moacir Maia and Marcelo Godoy and their students had begun digitizing the testaments of wealthy slave owners from the gold mining district of Mariana, which contained important information on their slaves. With our support, the Minas Gerais teams were able to finish the project and have sent the images that they digitized (more than 45,000 in total) as well as a detailed index of the eighty-four digitized volumes to Vanderbilt, where we will share them on the SSDA website. SSDA will build on this collaboration by proposing new projects in other colonial cities of the state of Minas Gerais, such as Diamantina (a diamond mining capital). I have already contacted the Archbishop of Diamantina and he seems open to this prospect.

Improved Technology and Data Enhancements

Early in the grant period we determined that we needed to completely overhaul the SSDA's technical infrastructure. Jenkins was originally hired in the fall of 2017 to work on this initiative. In

collaboration with Dale Poulter of Vanderbilt's Jean and Alexander Heard Library, he migrated the entire SSDA collection to a new Fedora digital repository. Volumes that had been digitized with funding from the British Library already had good metadata for search and discovery, but those digitized during the project's earliest years did not. Jenkins worked with Schultz to develop a workflow to create metadata for these volumes, and by the end of the 2017 – 2018 academic year all SSDA volumes had metadata records in both DC and MODS format.

The Fedora repository holding SSDA images was connected to a new web front-end using the [Islandora framework](#). We then built a [new website](#) to share and showcase the SSDA's holdings. Close to 1,500 volumes containing more than 450,000 images are currently available on that website, which also includes information about the project, connects to our global network of collaborators, and links to a variety of useful supporting materials for research and teaching. In the immediate future more than 200,000 additional images, including those from Minas Gerais, the Niterói EAP project, and an earlier EAP in northeastern Brazil, will be made available on our website, bringing the total size of the archive to close to 700,000 images.

Most recently, our collaboration in the [Enslaved](#) project necessitated the development of a workflow to build structured information regarding the individuals who appear in SSDA records in order to link our data with that of other partners. This endeavor was made possible in collaboration with Jim Schindling, currently completing his PhD at West Virginia, who modified his [Spatial Historian](#) tool expressly for our purposes. This tool facilitates the extraction of structured data from volume transcriptions and goes far beyond conventional flat spreadsheets by storing this data in a SQL database. The *Spatial Historian* also allows our data to be exported in the format required by *Enslaved*, making our participation in that project possible. We expect this tool to continue to be part of the SSDA workflow during the years to come.